The Image of Auschwitz in History Politics

PAPER GIVEN AT THE CONFERENCE IMAGINING THE UNIMAGINABLE: THE ICONIZATION OF AUSCHWITZ, UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA, GAINSVILLE FL, NOVEMBER 11-12, 2007

There are few places on Earth that are so burdened with symbolic meaning as is Auschwitz. The name of the largest Nazi concentration and extermination camp, where about 1.2 million human beings were murdered, among them nearly one million Jewish women, men, and children, has become a metaphor for the Holocaust itself. It can best be seen by the fact that the United Nations chose January 27, the anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz, as International Holocaust Remembrance Day. Beyond its meaning in the context of the Holocaust, *Auschwitz* has long since become a metaphor for genocide in general and for every form of mass killing. Its worldwide fame and symbolic content have tempted political activists of all leanings and from all countries, from environmentalists to anti-abortionists, from animal protectors to a German minister of defense, to (mis-)use *Auschwitz* for justifying their own political aims and for morally discrediting their opponents.

The high symbolic content of *Auschwitz* has made it also a favorite target of Holocaust deniers. Their *Auschwitz* is a travesty of the historic reality: a kind of a reformatory for adults, of course without gas chambers and the Wall of Death, and with an SS crew always devoted to the well-being of the prisoners. Under the guise of scholarly work, these self-promoted historical Revisionists pursue a political agenda: discriminating against Jews—who they accuse of "holohoaxing"—and whitewashing National Socialism. Therefore, in sixteen European and four non-European countries, Holocaust denial, a.k.a. The Auschwitz Lie, is a political crime, punishable with heavy fines and severe prison sentences.

From its beginning as a Nazi concentration camp in May 1940, *Auschwitz* has always been a tool of politics. This did not end when Soviet troops liberated the camp on January 27, 1945. Since then, not only the site has undergone significant transformations, but also the history of *Auschwitz* has been re-interpreted. These interpretations, however, were never static. They have changed over time and with the places, where reference was made to *Auschwitz*, and under the influence of group interests and the needs of domestic and foreign politics. As recent developments show, the argument about the image of *Auschwitz*, i.e. the "politically correct" interpretation of *Auschwitz* and its history, is by far not settled.

Before going into further details, let me make some remarks about the historical roots of the different non-metaphorical meanings of the term *Auschwitz*, which have led to much confusion, especially in the field of memory politics. The term *Auschwitz* primarily denotes the former German *Konzentrationslager Auschwitz* as a historical entity. But already "German Auschwitz" had three different "faces". There is first the Main Camp, a.k.a. Auschwitz I. It was established in a part of Poland that, in October 1939, was annexed to the German Reich, and consisted of an ensemble of solid, one- or two-story brick buildings on the premises of a former Polish artillery barracks in a southern suburb of the provincial town of Oświęcim. The "old" camp was extended in the spring of 1944 by a group of newly-built, solid two-story houses, the Camp Extension. Auschwitz I was the headquarters of the whole camp complex and did not differ much in size and function from a concentration camp in the Reich's interior, such as Dachau or Buchenwald. It was a major tool of German occupation politics in Upper Silesia and the southern part of the General Government. Most of its inmates were ethnic Poles, who constituted a majority of the prisoners in the beginning and remained the most numerous national group until the end. In addition, thousands of ethnic Poles, sentenced to death by a Gestapo summary court, were brought to Auschwitz I for execution by shooting at the "Wall of Death".

All camp buildings have remained intact. Those in the old part of Auschwitz I, fenced in by barbed wire, house the main part of the State

Museum Auschwitz-Birkenau: offices, library, archives, a visitor center, a reconstructed crematorium building with a gas chamber (*Krema I*), the *Arbeit macht frei* gate, and various exhibitions. The Camp Extension remained outside the fenced area and was made a residential district, named in honor of Captain Witold Pilecki, a Polish member of the resistance movement and Auschwitz survivor. One of the buildings there was turned into a Catholic church, consecrated to God's Charity.

Another face of *Auschwitz* are the over thirty slave labor camps that were founded as sub-camps of Auschwitz I, twenty-eight of them near industrial plants in Silesia. The biggest, Monowitz, a.k.a. Auschwitz III, was established in the end of 1942 near the building site of the IG Farben Buna works, about five miles east of Auschwitz I. Living conditions in the slave labor camps, as well as working conditions in the factories or mines, varied considerably and within a great range. Most sub-camps were established in 1944 and had a majority of Jewish inmates. They served, apart from economic purposes, as places of extermination through work in the framework of the *Final Solution*. After the war, some of the bigger camps, e.g. Eintrachthtte (*Zgoda*) and Neu-Dachs (*Jaworzno*), were used by the Polish communist authorities until the early 1950s as forced labor and transit camps for Polish anti-Communists, Germans, Silesians, and Ukrainians. Eventually all former Auschwitz sub-camps were dismantled, and the land or the buildings were given back to their previous owners or were nationalized. At most a simple memorial stone or plaque reminds the visitor of their former existence.

And then there is the grimmest face of *Auschwitz*: Birkenau, a.k.a. Auschwitz II, established in the last quarter of 1941. It was by far the largest camp of historic Auschwitz, situated two miles NW of Auschwitz I. It served two different purposes. On the one hand, it played a major role in the Nazi system of exploitation of prisoner labor. It was a huge slave labor camp itself, but also a giant turntable, from where tens of thousands of prisoners were distributed to other concentration camps within the German sphere of control. The appalling living conditions alone made Birkenau a hell on earth for its inmates. In addition, it was one of the major places of mass extermination of Jews in the framework of the *Final Solution*. At the infamous railroad ramp, about four fifth of the arriving Jewish deportees

were selected for immediate death in the gas chamber. Only those deemed "fit for work" were temporarily spared as slave laborers.

Shortly before retreating from Birkenau, the SS blew up the crematoria and set the warehouses with the property stolen from the deportees on fire. After liberation, Birkenau was nearly totally dismantled and fell into ruins. The northern half of the camp area was given back to its previous owners and is again used for farming. The *Neue Kommandantur* building—situated opposite the northeast corner of the remaining camp area—was turned into a Catholic church, consecrated to "The Blessed Virgin, Queen of Poland". The cross on its top overlooks the vast field of ruins that is left from Birkenau. Its counterpart as a landmark is the huge monument dedicated to the memory of the victims of German Auschwitz, erected at the southwest corner of the camp area. The few remnants of the Nazi era, among them some primitive one-story, masonry barracks and a few—partially reconstructed—wooden huts, as well as the recently renovated prisoner reception building (the *Sauna*), are part of the State Museum and are open to visitors.

But there is still a fourth "face" of *Auschwitz*: the postwar internment and transit camps that communist authorities had established in parts of Auschwitz I and II. Soviet transit camps for German POWs and Silesian civilians operated from February 1945 through June 1946, and Polish authorities ran a forced labor camp on the premises of Auschwitz II at least until the spring of 1946, probably still longer. Living and work conditions—according to survivor accounts—did not differ much from those in the slave labor camps of German Auschwitz. "Communist Auschwitz" still today touches a raw nerve of Polish society, and little scholarly research has hitherto been done on it. Silesian local historians estimate that about 200,000 people passed through Communist Auschwitz on their way to Soviet forced labor camps, among them about 90,000 Silesian men and women.

In public perception, *Auschwitz* is less associated with the historical entity, than with all that which survivors of German Auschwitz lived through and which they remembered after liberation, often many years later. Since German Auschwitz had at least three different "faces" and, what is more,

was steadily changing in space and time, the personal experience of an Auschwitz prisoner depended to a large degree on the place where s/he lived and on the period of time in which s/he stayed there. Moreover, it depended significantly on his/her status in the prisoner society, on the work detail s/he was assigned to, and on gender. This altogether has led not only to many disputes among survivors about what the "real Auschwitz" was, but also to different images of *Auschwitz* in the collective memories of different groups of people.

But more and more the image of *Auschwitz* in public perception is less formed by survivor memoirs than by the impressions that visitors get when touring the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum—with a pinch of sarcasm dubbed by the British social historian Tim Cole "Auschwitzland." With a steadily growing number of visitors from across the world—for 2007, 1.2 million are expected—the museum is a major place where the Holocaust is conveyed to the public. Laying a wreath at Auschwitz is an indispensable part of every state visit to Poland, and German or Austrian groups asking for public funding of a trip to Poland are well-advised to include a visit of Auschwitz into their plans. For Israeli and American Jewish youth, visiting Auschwitz, best as participants in the "March of the Living", has become a kind of rite de passage toward conscious Jewishness, a secular bar/bat mitzvah, conveying the political message that only a strong Israel will be able to prevent a repetition of Auschwitz, and that it is, therefore, the duty of every Diaspora Jew to support Israel unconditionally.

Immediately after liberation, and with the backing of the Soviet and Polish authorities, survivors searched the camp area and the adjacent administration and factory buildings for camp documents that the SS had failed to destroy or that prisoners had hidden. Helpful for them was the fact that those parts of Auschwitz I and Birkenau that made up Communist Auschwitz were kept under military guard and so were protected from vandalism and pillage from outside. Already in wartime, rumors had been circulating among the population about hidden Jewish gold, money, and jewelry. Immediately after liberation, treasure-hunters sneaked into the unprotected parts of the camps. Under cover of darkness, they demolished walls, floors, and foundations of camp buildings, and dug up the soil in

search of valuables. Grave robbers even sifted the ashes from the crematoria for gold. A voluntary camp guard, set up by survivors living in the neighborhood, eventually kept the plunderers at bay, reportedly more than once after a short exchange of fire.

Survivors were also the first who installed, in the beginning of 1946, a small museum on the premises of Auschwitz I. They also guided visitors, mostly friends and family members of fellow prisoners who had lost their lives at Auschwitz, through the camp area. They had first and foremost a personal concern: remembering their own and their comrades suffering. But soon state authorities intervened, and Auschwitz I was designated as the place for a national memorial of war, occupation, and Polish martyrdom. It was a political decision against Lublin-Majdanek, which would have been not less suitable—even its gas chamber and crematorium had fallen undamaged into the hands of the liberators. But a national memorial at Majdanek, too close to Poland's eastern border, might have recalled the specters of September 1939, when Germans and Soviets had divided the country among themselves along a line that now was the Polish-Soviet frontier. Auschwitz, looking to the West, would not run this risk.

In January 1947, reconstruction of the Wall of Death and *Krema I* began, and a first official exhibition was set up: the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum was born. It was inaugurated on June 14, 1947, by Jzef Cyrankiewicz, President of the Polish People's Republic and Auschwitz survivor, in a ceremony with about 30,000 guests from across Poland and abroad. The date was deliberately and symbolically chosen: the seventh anniversary of the first transport of Polish political prisoners to Auschwitz. The ceremony and the exhibition focussed on the martyrdom of the *Polish* people under German occupation. Jews were mentioned, but only marginally. A Holy Mass, attended also by Polish communist politicians, stressed the Polishness of the place.

Auschwitz should convey a political message with a firm anti-German tendency. It should remind Poland and the world of the atrocities perpetrated by *the Germans*, depicted as eternal aggressors and enemies of all Slavic peoples, and that only an iron fist could keep the Germans at bay. *Auschwitz* further served to justify the cession of Germany□s eastern

territories and the expulsion of the German population from these areas as punishment for the crimes perpetrated by the Germans against peace and humanity, for which *Auschwitz* stood as *pars pro toto*. This view, by the way, is still today publicly upheld by the Polish Right and the German Left: both use *Auschwitz* as a major counter-argument against a German memorial of the expulsions.

In the following years, until about 1954, *Auschwitz* served the regime as a weapon in the Cold War. Because the German Democratic Republic had become an ally of Poland and, in 1950, had officially recognized the Oder-Neisse border, guilt was no more sweepingly assigned to the Germans. The perpetrators of yesteryear now were the Fascists, in Polish *hitlerowcy*, and the Anglo-American imperialists were their alleged successors. A Struggle for Peace pavilion was added to the exhibition. It highlighted the successes of the Six-Year Plan in Poland and the Third Five-Year Plan in the USSR, whereas pictures from the Boer War, the civil wars in Spain and Greece, and the Korean war demonstrated the vileness of the Western powers, and neither the mushroom cloud over Hiroshima, nor the GI carrying a flag with the dollar sign and wading ankle-deep in a sea of blood were missing.

After Stalin's death, the ruling communists in Poland were no more obliged to integrate *Auschwitz* into Soviet foreign politics. The "Struggle for Peace" exhibition had already been closed shortly before, and all exhibits that had nothing to do with Auschwitz proper now vanished from the showcases. A new museum conception was prepared. In line with Party Leader Władysław Gomułka's program of a "National Communism" it again focussed on Poland. In 1955, on the tenth anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz, the new exhibition opened. With minor changes, it remained the same until the downfall of Communism. In addition, the Polish state provided a considerable amount of money for the renovation of the buildings and for the financing of the archives, a library, scholarly research, and a publication department, making Auschwitz one of the most important places of institutionalized historical remembrance in Poland.

Pressure from outside exerted by survivor organizations, such as the International Auschwitz Committee, had notably contributed to this development. Moreover, survivors urgently demanded an appropriate place

for commemorative mass rallies on the occasion of the numerous anniversaries. The density of building ruled the Main Camp out for this purpose, but Birkenau with its vast empty space proved to be ideally suited. It took, however, nearly ten years until, in 1967, the "Monument to the Victims of Fascism" was inaugurated. It is located west of the ruins of crematoria I and II. In its symbolism of death and resurrection it closely follows Christian tradition. The simple triangle and the glorifying inscription engraved in the main column give prominence to the *political* prisoner. Nineteen bronze plates in different languages, let into the ground, underline the international character of the "Struggle against Fascism". The monument hides, however, the fact that the vast majority of the Auschwitz dead were not political fighters, but individuals whose sole crime was to be born Jewish.

In the course of the internationalization of Auschwitz, national exhibitions have been set up in the Main Camp since 1961. An official museum brochure of 1968 names pavilions of seven nations: Yugoslavia, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, the Soviet Union, the German Democratic Republic, Belgium, and Denmark, and mentions also a Block of Jewish Martyrdom, marked, however, as not open to visitors. The Jewish pavilion opened in April 1968, on the height of the Warsaw regime's anti-Zionist campaign, which resulted in a nearly complete exodus of the last Jews of Poland. With a view to public appeal, the exhibition should counter the accusations of antisemitism raised abroad against Poland. Claiming a common fate of ethnic Poles and Jews as purportedly equal targets of the Nazi genocide, the exhibition laid great stress upon documenting Poland's bravery and solidarity in defending Jews during the occupation. It passed, however, over the passivity of the majority of the Polish people toward the fate of the Jews, and over the complicity of a minority with the occupant in anti-Jewish measures. Being clumsy in its execution and all too transparent in its hypocrisy, the exhibition damaged the regime's credibility more than it helped restore it. Small wonder that, in the years to follow, it frequently was temporarily closed.

The countries that have had national pavilions at Auschwitz also have used them to convey their own history politics. For example, the first French exhibition, inaugurated in September 1979, glorified the French as a people

of heroic resistance fighters and passed over collaboration in silence. During the planning phase, a high government official objected to the lists of deportees to be exhibited, because the names on them did not sound particularly French. Small wonder: three quarters of the deportees were Jewish refugees from Germany and Nazi occupied countries in Central Europe, to whose deportation the Vichy regime did not have much objection. The Austrian exhibition, as another example, received the visitor with the founding myth of the Second Republic, viz. that "Austria was the first victim of German aggression". The exhibition focused on suffering and resistance, but avoided to mention unpleasant facts, such as the overwhelming enthusiasm with which the Austrian people had greeted the *Anschluss* in 1938, or that Austrians were more than proportionately represented among the perpetrators of the Holocaust.

A turn in memory politics came about with the Pope's visit on June 7 and 8, 1979. Though already the very first exhibition at Auschwitz, in the basement of Block 4, had caught the eye with a huge cross as a symbol of suffering, and though Holy Mass had always been an indisputable part of commemorative ceremonies at Auschwitz, it was the Pope's visit that brought the breakthrough toward catholicizing *Auschwitz*. On his first pilgrimage to his home country after his election, Pope John Paul II celebrated High Mass at Birkenau together with a quarter of a million faithful. In his sermon the Pope emphasized the Christian, strictly speaking: *Catholic*, side of the suffering of the victims of Auschwitz, symbolized by the Polish Franciscan monk Raimund Kolbe (canonized 1982 as Maximilian Maria), who died for a fellow prisoner, and the German Carmelite nun Edith Stein (canonized 1998 as "Theresia Benedicte a Croce"), who was deported to Auschwitz in the beginning of August 1942 and gassed immediately after arrival.

The Pope's visit also indicated an important change in remembering Auschwitz. From now on, no more the Polish state alone would determine how *Auschwitz* should be interpreted and commemorated. The victims and their organizations began to take the floor, and new problems arose. Nearly four decades after the liberation of Auschwitz, different cultural memories had formed in different societies and led to different—and sometimes

conflicting—interpretations of *Auschwitz*. For example, in Israel and the West, *Auschwitz* stands for the genocide of the European Jews. Its symbolic place is Birkenau with the ramp and the ruins of the crematoria and gas chambers. In Poland, however, *Auschwitz* stands for the martyrdom of the Polish people under the German occupation in World War II. Its symbolic place is the Main Camp with the Wall of Death and Father Kolbe's prison cell.

In the last years, the Romanies (Gypsies) have audibly made themselves felt. For them *Auschwitz* stands for the *porrajmos*, the genocide that the Nazis perpetrated on their people. Symbolic place of remembrance for Romanies are the ruins of the "Gypsy Family Camp" at Birkenau. For Russians and other peoples of the former Soviet Union, *Auschwitz* stands for about 15,000 murdered POWs, but also for victory in the "Great Patriotic War"—Soviet soldiers were the liberators of Auschwitz. For other minorities that were persecuted by the Nazis, such as Jehovah's Witnesses, homosexuals, or non-Polish political prisoners, *Auschwitz* has no specifically symbolic meaning—it was one of the many places of their suffering. Victims classified by the Nazis as Asocials or Professional Criminals until today have not found a place in official commemoration at Auschwitz.

The argument about the brand name Auschwitz (Tim Cole) has been fought out mainly between Jews and Poles. They disagree first and foremost in two points. Without questioning that the vast majority of Auschwitz victims were Jews, persecuted for racial reasons, the Poles hold that their people's fate, in principle, was equal to that of the Jews. (Recently the Romanies have joined as a third party in this competition of the victims.) This view, however, is unacceptable for the Jewish side. It denies the uniqueness of the Holocaust, the crucial point of Jewish self-definition in an increasingly secular world, and puts at stake the preferential treatment of Jewish affairs in many fields of international politics (and in some countries, also in domestic politics). A second point of disagreement are Christian symbols at Auschwitz. Both sides agree that Auschwitz is the largest cemetery of their respective peoples. But for Poles, for who Polishness and Catholicism—in its specifically Polish variant—are inextractibly intertwined, the Cross is an are indispensable attribute of a place of martyrdom, and they cannot

imagine a Polish cemetery without it. For Jews, however, the Cross evokes memories of nearly two thousand years of persecution under the Sign of the Cross. For them, a Christian cross at a Jewish cemetery is intolerable.
They, therefore, oppose "catholicizing" *Auschwitz*. They have not forgotten that Father Raimund Kolbe, before the war, was the editor of staunchly antisemitic publications, and they point to the fact that Edith Stein was killed not as a martyr of Christian faith, but because of her race, as being Jewish. In 1984, the conflict about catholicizing *Auschwitz* escalated into a public controversy, when the *Neue Kommandatur* of Birkenau was transformed into a church, and Carmelite nuns moved into the "Theater Building", situated at the perimeter of the Main Camp. Because of worldwide protests from Jewish organizations the Carmelite nuns in 1993 eventually had to move out. In 1998 a new serious conflict broke out, when Polish youth erected crosses in a former gravel pit near the perimeter of the Main Camp. The pit had been used by the SS as a place of execution. The Polish state intervened, and in May 1999 the crosses were removed, with the exception of the Pope's Cross—the cross under which John Paul II had celebrated Mass in June 1979.
The conflicting ways how Poles and Jews look at *Auschwitz* have their deepest roots in opposite national stereotypes, passed on from generation to generation and reinforced by history politics. The Polish perspective is dominated by the self-image of Poland as the only country in Europe that always was friendly toward Jews, and of the Pole as a noble savior of the Jews during the Holocaust. The Jewish perspective, however, is dominated by the image of Poland as the only country in Europe where pogroms of Jews took place after the end of the war, and of the Pole as a Holocaust profiteer, be it as *szmalcownik*, who betrayed his Jewish neighbor to the Germans for two pints of vodka, or simply by appropriating the estate of the murdered Jews.
Restitution of previously Jewish owned property, or, where this is impossible for practical reasons, to come up with monetary compensation, hangs over Poland like the sword of Damocles. Various organizations with great experience and a considerable success history in this field, such as the Jewish World Congress or the World Jewish Restitution Organization,

already have made claims in this matter since the end of 1996. It is, however, obvious that Poland, once home to 3.5 million Jewish citizens, will never be able to fulfill even a fraction of these demands without economically ruining herself. Therefore the idea arose in Poland that the respective Jewish claims should be directed to Germany, with the argument that, in the Holocaust, the Germans—and not the Poles—had expropriated the Polish Jews. This reasoning, however, overlooks the fact that all previously German and all abandoned Jewish property in the territories that constitute Poland today, after the war has passed into Polish hands.

Small wonder that averting every attempt at bringing Poland and the Poles in negative connection with the Holocaust has become one of the major objectives of Polish foreign politics since the late 1990s. A main target are Western media that use the term "Polish camps" in newspaper articles or TV programs dealing with the Holocaust, which is regarded in Poland as a particularly vicious kind of "Auschwitz lie". Though in the context of the Holocaust "Polish camp" has always been understood as referring to geography—vide, for example, the transcripts of the Nuremberg trials or Polish postwar literature—Polish politicians today see in its use a blurring of the boundaries between perpetrators and victims. They assume that people in Western countries, especially in the U.S., who hear or see the expression "Polish camp", will think that Poles were the perpetrators at Auschwitz, even if both text and pictures clearly say the opposite.

Such considerations let the Polish parliament pass, in the autumn of 2006, an amendment to the penal code, presented to the public as a law re-defining the Auschwitz lie. It provides imprisonment of up to three years for everybody who publicly impute to the Polish people participation in, organizing of, or responsibility for . . . national socialist crimes. It was for the first time applied in 2007 against a Spanish journalist. (The case is still pending.) As a supporting measure, the Polish government demanded from the UNESCO's World Heritage Committee the renaming of "Concentration Camp Auschwitz" as Auschwitz-Birkenau. The German Fascist Concentration and Extermination Camp. According to Poland's Deputy Minister of Culture, it should make clear to the world that, at Auschwitz, *the Germans* were the perpetrators, and nobody else. The proposal, however,

caused public protest from the Silesian minority in Poland, which, in an open letter to the UNESCO, pointed to the postwar use of Auschwitz by Soviet and Polish authorities. Probably for that reason, the final name, agreed to by the UNESCO committee on June 27, 2007, obtained in brackets the addendum 1940-1945.

As long as the German Democratic Republic existed, Polish official brochures and declarations explicitly mentioned Germans among the victims of Auschwitz (and also as members of the camp resistance movement). In today's political climate, characterized by a widespread revival of anti-German attitudes in Poland, Germans at Auschwitz come into view solely as perpetrators. As victims, only Jews, Poles, Gypsies, Russian prisoners of war, and members of other peoples appear in official texts. On the Museum's website we read that the "first prisoners of Auschwitz" were Poles, who arrived there in mid-June 1940. The fact that the first thirty prisoner numbers at Auschwitz were given to Germans nearly a month earlier seems to have sunk into oblivion. A similar problem pose the victims of Communist Auschwitz. The Silesian minority in Poland has several times asked for the permission to put up a commemorative plaque on the site. It was always denied to them. Small wonder that they feel that German POWs and Silesian prisoners of Communist Auschwitz are still treated as second-class victims, who do not merit public commemoration.

On the other hand, the British recently have jumped on the *Auschwitz* bandwagon. Thirty-eight British prisoners of war, inmates of a camp that had nothing to do with German Auschwitz or the Nazi concentration camp system in general, died on August 20, 1944, in an Allied air attack on the Buna plant. They are officially remembered by a commemorative plaque, unveiled on occasion of the 60th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz. In his inauguration speech, the British Minister for Veterans placed them amongst the 1.2 million people who died at Auschwitz.

Finally, in the spring of 2007 the question of the nationality of a certain group of Auschwitz victims has sparked off a bitter Polish-Russian dispute, which is not yet settled at the time being. It concerns about one million persons, who were deported to Auschwitz from prewar Polish territory

that, after September 17, 1939, was annexed to the Soviet Union (and has remained there after the war). For Russia, the deportees are Soviet victims, because they had obtained Soviet citizenship, for Poland, they still are Polish victims. Russia and Poland accuse one another of "falsifying history" and of trying to impose on others their own view of history. In a general climate of mutual distrust and tension, both sides use *Auschwitz* in history politics: the Russians to demonstrate the legitimacy of Soviet claims to the former Polish eastern territories, the Poles to denounce the 1939 Soviet annexation of Polish territory as a violation of international law. The Poles see the Russian behavior as an expression of an eternal Russian tendency to dominate Eastern Europe, and the Russians see the Polish behavior as an expression of an eternal Polish tendency towards self-opinionatedness and self-pity. According to a definition given by the great 20th century Russian historian Michail Pokrovskiy, history is politics projected onto the past. For *Auschwitz*, it seems, an end of history is nowhere in sight.